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Mark Crouch of New Castle works in his basement office on a book about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

On trail of truth about JFK's death

By JOHN CHAMBLESS
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NEW CASTLE — This much is clear: On Nov. 22, 1963, a bullet shattered the skull of President John F. Kennedy as he rode in a motorcade in Dallas.

Everything else is in shadow.

"When you're talking about the assassination, it's not just one or two anomalies," said Mark Crouch. "It's thousands of things."

Crouch, 36, was 8 years old when Kennedy was assassinated. Today, Crouch, who lives in the Collins Park section of New Castle, is the general manager of WCHE-AM in West Chester and, for the past 11 years, a part-time researcher of the president's death.

He's working on a book of his own, and was recently chosen to be one of a dozen researchers tapped by director Oliver Stone to supply information for Stone's upcoming film, "JFK."

The film is already being blasted by critics for alleged inaccuracies in its source material — Jim Garrison's "On the Trail of the Assassins" and Jim Marrs' "Crossfire."

Crouch said he blames the premature condemnation of the film on assassination theorists who have been shut out, or those who disagree with the points set forth in Stone's screenplay.

Crouch can recite the events of that November afternoon in Dallas down to the minute. He has interviewed those close to the president and those who have theories of their own. He has pondered documents, scrutinized photos, and reviewed television broadcasts from the week after the death, and he keeps coming up with this: There is no one

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theory that will sort out rumor from fact and tie together the maddening loose ends.

Crouch said he never intended to become a Kennedy researcher.

"In March of 1981, I was working as general manager of a little radio station in Chestertown, Md. Across the street was this little country store run by an old couple, Jim and Edith Fox.

"On the day President Reagan was shot in 1981, I went into the store and Mr. Fox comes out, mumbling and grumbling, saying, 'It's the same thing all over again! Dallas all over again!' "

Curious, Crouch asked for more details and Fox showed him a battered brown folder containing — along with copies of Adolf Hitler's will and his marriage certificate — some color photos of the back seat of a Lincoln Continental limousine stained with blood.

But the most shocking photos were of President Kennedy's autopsy.

"They really shocked me," Crouch said. "One, they were pretty gruesome, but two, they were so at odds with what the Warren Commission said."

Fox turned out to be a retired Secret Service agent who had worked in the Kennedy White House.

By coincidence, Crouch had just read David Lifton's "Best Evidence," a book detailing Lifton's theory that Kennedy's body had been tampered with during his autopsy.

Fox knew the autopsy photos were important, but until he saw them, he believed they supported the official findings of the Warren Commission, which concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in the assassination.

"I knew the autopsy pictures didn't agree with what the Dallas doctors saw," Crouch said. "They didn't agree with the autopsy report at all. Everybody talks about the wound on the back of the head. In the autopsy pictures, there's no wound on the back of the head, but there is a blatant airbrushing of the image there to make it look intact.

"If Kennedy had an exit wound on the back of his head, you see, Oswald couldn't have fired the fatal shot. It had to have come from the front," Crouch said.

The theory that Kennedy was shot from the front is reflected both by the medical evidence — the back part of his head was shown to be missing in X-rays, indicating a bullet entered in his temple and exploded out the back — and by the famous film of the assassination.

In the complete, unedited version of the 8mm footage, Kennedy's body clearly snaps back into his seat, as if struck from the front. The film was not shown complete until 1975, Crouch said, when it refueled conspiracy theories worldwide. At the time of the assassination, only inconclusive still pictures were released.

Crouch was allowed to copy Fox's autopsy photos, but promised not to release them to the public until after Fox's death.

In 1988, both Fox and his wife had died, and Crouch let author David Lifton use the pictures in the reprint of "Best Evidence."

In 1989, Crouch met Robert Groden of Boothwyn, a photo expert who confirmed that the autopsy photos had been altered. Groden is a major researcher on Stone's "JFK" film.

An early version of the film script has been leaked to the press — by disgruntled JFK theorists, Crouch said.

"Most writers starve while working on the case until they get a book published," Crouch said. "And then Oliver Stone walks in with a $40 million budget and a research staff. They're jealous."

Among those who disagree with the findings of the Warren Commission are countless subgroups that bicker among themselves, Crouch said.

"Some people believe Oswald was innocent. Some people believe he was guilty. And then there are those who believe it was the Mafia, or Castro inspired, or the KGB, and those who lean toward a higher authority in the United States government."

Crouch has his own theory. He says Kennedy was assassinated by what he calls "the military industrial complex."

To support his point, he pulled out three documents, formerly top secret but now declassified. One is a National Security Action Memorandum issued on Oct. 2, 1963, which states, in effect, that Kennedy had approved the withdrawal of 1,000 U.S. military personnel from South Vietnam by the end of 1963. Kennedy apparently believed the war was unwinnable and was beginning to end U.S. involvement.

There is no one theory that will sort out rumor from fact and tie together the loose ends.

The second document is a draft of another memorandum, this one written on Nov. 21, 1963 — the day Kennedy left for Dallas. It effectively reverses the proposal from the first memo, and stresses that the United States would continue trying to win in Vietnam.

The third document, written on Nov. 26, 1963, is the final version of that memo, firmly committing the United States to continue action in Vietnam.

Crouch points to the three documents as evidence that "We were put into high gear in Vietnam before Kennedy was killed," an action historians have usually laid at the feet of JFK's successor, Lyndon Johnson.

Did Kennedy himself reverse his position on the war? Or did someone reverse Kennedy's policy in his absence, knowing the president would soon be dead?

No one knows.

The mountain of contradictory or botched evidence — including an autopsy that was constantly being interrupted by conflicting statements from the government and the Kennedy family — makes the truth nearly impossible to find.

It's a testament to that complexity that so many years after Kennedy's death, the official explanation seems so questionable and the conspiracy theories so maddeningly out of reach.

At this point, if the absolute truth were revealed, Crouch said, "People would say, 'Oh, it's just another book.' "

As for Crouch, "I'm going to do one book and that's it," he said, laughing.

"The point is," he said, "in 1991, the question that people have to ask — and that I hope they will start to ask when Oliver Stone's movie comes out — is why did the government of the United States alter and destroy autopsy evidence?

"The American people are entitled to know the truth."